



How Did Our Current Haggadah Become the Standard?

A GLIMPSE INTO THE HISTORY OF HOW WE TELL THE STORY
OF YETZIAS MITZRAYIM AT THE SEDER

BY LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN

The discovery of the Cairo Genizah, the storehouse of medieval manuscripts and documents in the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat, Old Cairo, in the late nineteenth century has led to a virtual rediscovery of Jewish history during the Middle Ages. In fact, it has provided us with an enormous amount of information about our sacred literature, as well as illuminating the social and political history of Jews in the Middle East and Mediterranean basin. Some of the items found even related to Europe, such as very early writings in Yiddish. But one of the most significant gains was a deeper understanding of the history and literature of the *geonim* of Babylonia, as well as the text of our *siddur* and the Pesach Seder.

It is actually quite amazing that some of the most important manuscripts of the oldest versions of the *Haggadah* aren't found in the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem, the British Museum in London, or even in the Cambridge University Library's massive *genizah* collection. Rather, they are right here in the United States, at the Center for Judaic Studies of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and the Jewish Theological Seminary

in Manhattan. The material in these collections has facilitated numerous amazing studies on the *Haggadah*, providing us with textual evidence from the tenth century CE. News reports of an even earlier version of the *Haggadah*, actually a manuscript with some other *tefillos* and parts of the Seder, appear to be premature as the authenticity of this document has been questioned.

All of us are familiar with the concluding statement of the Pesach Seder: "*Chasal siddur Pesach k'hilchaso, k'chol mishpato v'chukaso*, the arrangement of the Pesach is completed, according to all its regulations and laws. Just as we have merited to set it forth, so too may we merit to perform it." These words are actually an excerpt from the *Yotzeir piyyut* (liturgical poem recited at *Shacharis*) for Shabbos Hagadol. This poem begins with a survey of the requirements to remove *chametz* and prepare matzah, and then goes on to enumerate the *mitzvos* and rituals that are to be performed at the Seder. The purpose of this *piyyut*, composed by R. Yosef ben Shmuel Tov Elem (mid-eleventh century; known as Bonfil in French), was to review the entire Pesach Seder on Shabbos Hagadol.

In its original text, "*Chasal siddur Pesach*" referred to the com-







pletion of the review of all the laws pertaining to the Seder and expressed the hope that we would merit to fulfill them on the upcoming holiday. It also contained a prayer for the opportunity to celebrate Pesach fully in the *Beis Hamikdash* in the time of the final redemption. However, in its context at the end of the *Haggadah*, it refers to our successful completion of the Seder and our hope that we will merit to bring the *korban Pesach* in the *Beis Hamikdash*.

Some communities no longer recite *Yotzros*, but many still retain the *minhag* to review the core of the *Haggadah*, the “*Maggid*” section, on Shabbos Hagadol. This custom was first documented in the sixteenth century (Rama and Levush; *Orach Chaim* 430), but we can see from the poem of R. Yosef that the idea of reviewing the Seder on this special Shabbos is centuries older.

Indeed, the *Haggadah* itself can be seen as a book of Jewish history. It documents not only the history of our slavery and Exodus from Egypt, but also the experience of the Jewish people in fulfilling the mitzvah of telling and retelling the story of *Yetzias Mitzrayim* throughout the ages. Tracing the history of the *Haggadah* itself can be a key to understanding the saga of the Jews in later times and the dissemination of our *mesorah*.

One of the remarkable things that came to light through the discovery of the Cairo Genizah is that parallel to the *siddur* and *Haggadah* that we are used to, both of which emerged in accordance with the *halachah* and customs of the *Talmud Bavli*, there existed a parallel Eretz Yisrael version in the period of the *geonim* and early Middle Ages that was much more in keeping with the rulings of the *Talmud Yerushalmi*. The Genizah texts preserve the earliest *Haggadahs* of our version, the Babylonian one, as well as those of Eretz Yisrael that eventually fell into disuse because of the authority of the *geonim* of Bavel.

We know that even as the Islamic conquest of the Middle East (638-40 CE) greatly weakened the Jewish population of Eretz Yisrael, their customs continued to be followed in *shuls* in Egypt and in other places. Many of these traditions influenced the Jews



of Southern Italy. As a result, as Jews moved northward through Italy and into Germany, the traditions of Eretz Yisrael had an influence on the development of the *minhagim* of Ashkenaz.

The basic outline of our Seder is found in the Mishnah in *Pesachim* 10. But it is only when we look at the *Haggadah* that we can fully understand how those instructions were put into effect. There is an enormous amount that can be learned from a perusal of the earliest *Haggadahs*. By examining these early versions of the Seder, we can learn some important differences that existed between the customs of Eretz Yisrael and Bavel. For example, the Jews of Eretz Yisrael recited a special poetic *Kiddush*, which was regarded as unacceptable by the Babylonian *geonim* because it departed from the regular text. Eretz Yisrael Jews ate several foods for *karpas* involving different

brachos. They did not recite “*Avadim Hayinu*” or mention the Four Sons. Instead, they proceeded immediately to the quotation from *Yehoshua* (24:2-4) (*Vayomer Yehoshua...b'eiver hanahar...*), and there were other differences as well.

In fact, there is so much to say about the differences between *Haggadahs* in the years right after the close of the Gemara that we will concentrate here on what is arguably the central part of the Seder, the “*Maggid*” section. As explained in the Mishnah, this section expounds upon the words “*Arami oved avi*” (*Devarim* 26:5-8), the recitation that a farmer is required to recite upon bringing his first fruits to the *Mikdash*. This passage was chosen for the Seder because the Midrash says that it refers to *galus Mitzrayim* and provides a short summary of the suffering and redemption of the Jewish people in Egypt. The “*Maggid*” portion is essentially the study of a detailed, complex *midrash* in which virtually each word of this passage is explained in light of other verses in the *Tanach*.

When we look at the early manuscripts in the Genizah, we find that this was not always the case. In fact, had we had the opportunity to participate in a Seder in the days of the *Beis Hamikdash* or





in the time of the *Tannaim* (teachers of the Mishnah), we would have been treated to a much more spontaneous discussion of the material from *Devarim* than we are used to. The earliest *Haggadahs* contain the verses from the Torah but not the Midrashic explanations that are the mainstay of our Seder night discussions.

We know this in particular from examination of the manuscripts in the Genizah. In both the earliest Eretz Yisrael and Babylonian versions, we have verses with only a few explanations. In other words, the earlier custom was to rely on the leader of the Seder to provide the explanations. This pattern continued in the Eretz Yisrael-type *Haggadahs*, but as can also be seen from the early *siddurim* of Rav Amram Gaon (d. 875) and Rav Saadyah Gaon (d. 942), it wasn't long before the complex and substantially expanded Midrash that we are used to, that has some parallels in earlier *Midrashim* and that was clearly becoming the norm in the Babylonian Jewish community, became part of the standard manuscript of the *Haggadah*.

In fact, the process of making the Babylonian version the standard can be observed both indirectly and directly. The indirect evidence comes from the tendency of Eretz Yisrael-types of *Haggadahs* to begin to include some elements that typify the Babylonian text, such as "*Avadim Hayinu*" and Rabbi Yehudah's mnemonic for the Ten Plagues. But the direct evidence comes from a *teshuvah* of Rav Natronai Gaon (ninth century, ed. Brody #138) in which he excoriates some Seder practices, among them simply reading the passage "*Arami oved avi*" while ignoring the *midrash* at the core of our *Haggadah*. He even identifies these practices as Karaite. Accordingly,

Rav Menachem Kasher (*Haggadah Sheleimah*, 29-30) understands Rav Natronai Gaon as condemning these practices as influenced by the Karaites, whose Seder omitted all rabbinic material.

This small example of the development of "*Maggid*" gives us a chance to reflect on an overall pattern in the development of Jewish tradition. Our Ashkenazic and Sephardic *nuscha'os* derive primarily from the two Babylonian versions of Rav Amram Gaon and Rav Saadyah. Each set down an order of *tefillos* that was highly influential. Somehow, though, Rav Amram's Seder primarily influenced the Ashkenazic communities, while Rav Saadyah influenced the Sephardic ones.

The traditions of Eretz Yisrael, by which we mean specifically those not held in common with the Jews of Bavel, began to decline after the Moslem conquest. At the same time, some of these traditions made their way through Italy into Germany, where they became part and parcel of the Ashkenazic *minhag*. This is exactly the phenomenon that can be observed in these early *Haggadahs*.

The earliest *Haggadah* manuscripts are a treasure trove for understanding the profound teachings of our *mesorah* regarding *Yetzias Mitzrayim* and its miracles. They also reveal a plethora of information about the history of how our tradition was able to flourish in different times and places.

Eshana habaah biYerushalayim habenuyah! ●

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